

---

Mark SOKOLYANSKY

---

## ***Richard III* in Russian Theatre at the Twilight of the “Thaw”**

Shakespeare's *Richard III* played a minor role, if any, in the repertoire of Russian pre-revolutionary theatre. One cannot speak of a rich scenic history of the play in tsarist Russia. In fact, Shakespeare's history plays were performed rarely on the Russian stage in the nineteenth century or on the Soviet stage before the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Moscow's Maly Theatre, the most important theatre in the nineteenth century, performed *Richard III* in the 1877/78 season, starring Alexander Lensky as Richard Gloucester. The production was revived in 1884 and again in 1896 with the great actor Alexander Yuzhin (Sumbatov) as Richard. Russian theatre historians agree that it was the top achievement in the pre-revolutionary history of *Richard III* on the national stage (Shtein 278–82).

The unpopularity of the play in tsarist and Stalin's times is a socio-cultural phenomenon which is not difficult to comprehend. This story of inhuman tyranny, in which not only the *rise* but also the *decline and fall* of the bloody usurper is represented, could not but help contradict the numerous restrictions and prohibitions of totalitarian ideology and politics. Although neither this play nor other dramatic works by Shakespeare were officially prohibited in Soviet Russia or after 1922, in the Soviet Union, the play was, nevertheless, rarely performed.

The Moscow Maly Theatre, which had the most stable interest in this play during the epoch of *fin de siècle*, made one more attempt to stage *Richard III* in the season of 1919/20. The performance was directed by the talented Russian theatrical director Alexander Sanin with the same Richard (Alexander Yuzhin)

---

<sup>1</sup> In her monograph on the fate of Shakespeare's drama on the Soviet stage, Sofia Nels (1960) writes only about the tragedies and comedies.

who had starred in the 1896 production. It did not repeat, however, the former success, and its run on stage was brief.

In 1935 *Richard III* was staged by the Great Dramatic Theatre (BDT) in Leningrad. The director's idea and plan belonged to K. Tverskoj, but two other names were listed on the playbill as co-directors: V. Sofronov and G. Gurevich. The sets were created by the prominent theatrical artist Alexander Tyshler, who was also famous as the creator of the sets for the production of *King Lear* in the State Jewish Theatre (Moscow) in the same year. Two well-known Russian actors played Richard in turn – Vasilij Sofronov and Nikolaj Monakhov. The production was successful and ran for 124 performances. After this performance the history of Soviet theatre saw no new productions of *Richard III* until 1957. For the last eighteen years of Stalin's bloody dictatorship, the play was never included in the repertoire plans of the vast majority of the theatres in the whole country.

"A new stage in Soviet Shakespeare repertoire began in 1954", according to Aleksandr Anikst, the prominent Russian Shakespeare scholar of the Soviet period (Anikst 630). It was the beginning of the so-called period of the "Thaw". Such was (and is) the widely popular definition of the post-Stalinist, or Khrushchev, decade, which owed its metaphoric semantics to the title of a long short story of the same name by the well-known Russian writer Ilya Ehrenburg, published in 1954. In short, it was a period of animation in the intellectual and spiritual life of the country, and the changes for the better also touched the treatment of Shakespearean plays by Soviet theatre. The essential renovation of national and multinational theatrical aesthetics in Shakespeare productions began then.

In 1954, on the threshold of this "post-Caesarian" period, a new approach to Shakespeare became apparent in two new productions of *Hamlet* in Moscow and Leningrad (Sokolyansky 118–24). The interest of Soviet directors in *Richard III* ripened slowly for different socio-cultural and political reasons. First, none of the Soviet multinational theatres (Russian, Ukrainian, Georgian, Lithuanian) could fall back on the considerable national tradition of interpretation; second, the "Caesarian" times of Stalinist rule had not yet been relegated to the past, and early changes in the political order had not yet been firmly established.

Interestingly, the first attempt to perform *Richard III* in the post-Stalinist USSR was in Georgia, the motherland of the dictator. In 1957 the Kote Mardzhanishvili Theatre in Tbilisi staged *Richard III* directed by G. Kuntashvili (sets were by the well-known artist Iosif Sumbatashvili) with Vasilij Godziashvili as Richard. In the reviewers' opinion, the performance was not really a great success, but it was a necessary and important first step in the appropriation of this play by Soviet theatre (Krymova 150). The real *boom* in *Richard III* in the Soviet Union began several years later – in the first half of the 1960s, i.e. in the twilight of the Thaw, when this history play became more popular

with Russian (and other Soviet) theatrical companies than even *Hamlet* or *Romeo and Juliet*.

Why did the interest in this chronicle play develop so slowly in the Soviet Union? Some historians of Russian and Soviet theatre argue that this sluggishness was due to the long time it took for directors to comprehend this difficult drama and develop plans for their productions (Mel'nikova 173–89). Others argue that the inertia was due to the long engrained fear theatrical directors had of the theatrical censors for whom the play could easily provoke reminiscences and analogies of the recent notorious past and concrete political figures (Lawrence Olivier's film adaptation of *Richard III* was not shown to a broader Soviet audience until 1964). The second wave of total denunciation of Stalin and his personality cult that took place in 1961 probably stimulated the theatre's interest in the play. Both explanations may be admissible, but only in an organic combination one with another. Political and ideological reasons are important in countries with totalitarian regimes, but one cannot ignore the individual creative and purely aesthetical motives as well.

Three notable performances took place, not in Moscow and Leningrad, the official and cultural capitals, but in *provincial* cities. In 1962 *Richard III* was performed by the experienced director Pyotr Monastyrsky in the dramatic theatre of Kujbyshev (now Samara); the sets and costumes were designed by P. Belov. One year later the play was staged in another Volga city – Gorkij (now Nizhnij Novgorod) – by Evgenij Tabachnikov with the sets by Valerij Gerasimenko. One and a half years later *The Tragical History of Richard III* was performed at the Stanislavsky Theatre of Russian Drama in Erevan, the capital of the Armenian republic. The director was Avet Avetisyan and the set designer A. Shakaryan.

The Shakespeare productions of the 1950s were marked as a rule by traditional and pompous sets which determined, to some extent, an old-fashioned style of acting (Mel'nikova 175). The productions of *Richard III* mentioned above were performed with simpler sets, neither conventional and functional nor “archaeological” and cumbersome. In Kujbyshev and Gorkij a throne served as a metonym for the Royal place, a relevant symbol of power and the protagonist's thirst of power while in Erevan the accessories of the Royal palace were even more sparingly represented and the sets were poor and almost ascetic.

In Kujbyshev, both the platform before the throne and the path to the throne were red, which alluded to both the colour of blood and the colour of the Soviet flag, and Richard's costume became a brighter and even brighter red with each new murder he committed or commissioned, a cliché the director unfortunately did not avoid. In Gorkij, E. Tabachnikov used only one sign for the palace – a throne located in the centre of the stage. In Erevan, A. Avetisyan preferred more conventional decorations for the performance. Although timid,

all these innovations were, nevertheless, dictated by the directors' will to distance their productions from an out-of-date romantic treatment of the well-known play.

The decisive point in every performance was the understanding of the protagonist's character. In the Georgian performance of 1957, V. Godziashvili played Richard in the relatively traditional romantic manner (Bartoshevich 53) – probably the last attempt to romanticize Richard in the Soviet theatre of the post-Stalin era. The performances of 1962–64 were marked by just the opposite intention, but the manners of their realization were quite different, as were the actors playing Richard.

Nikolaj Zasukhin, in the Kujbyshev performance, looked like a real monster; however, there was nothing extraordinary or monstrous in his manners and speech. As Pyotr Monastyrsky, the director of the performance, wrote later, the actor tried to express “the tragedy of individualism's fruitlessness [...]”. N. Zasukhin summed up the history of his hero: “Richard shed rivers of blood for the sake of power. He profaned all objects sacred to humanity and remained a symbol of monstrous rationality. Besides, he never felt even the simplest, usual human joy” (Monastyrsky 203).

In the Gorkij production, Vladimir Samojlov wore little make up and in spite of his hump, appeared physically normal, an audacious and clever person; his Richard, in black and grey clothes with the golden chain around his neck, could even be considered to be an attractive man. His “inner evolution [...] is expressed not through repentance, but through the strengthening boredom and contempt for people” (Alekseeva 35).

In outward appearance these stage characters were totally different, but one could notice a common trend in both productions: the directors' and players' distinct intention to deprive their Richards of traditionally demonic features and bring them closer to reality, especially to the audience's personal experience. And that experience was connected with Stalin's times. The stance of the theatre toward the protagonist called forth obvious associations with and discussions about not only the extent to which the performances followed the playwright's concept, but also the real, bloody “Richard” of recent Soviet history.

In the Erevan, the director's intention was unexpected. He wanted to illustrate the old Russian theatre proverb that “the court played king” (короля играет свита) and that feudal England, as described by Shakespeare, owed its national tragedy not only to Richard Gloucester, but also to the royal court. Such an intention was, however, contradicted sharply by the talented actor performing the leading part. Armen Dzhigarhanyan played Richard gaily and enthusiastically, standing out against the background of the rest of the company. His vigorous and sometimes “merry” Richard was a villain, of course, but in several scenes he resembled an actor who is inclined to *overact*. While the whole situation was close to tragic, Richard/Dzhigarhanyan himself could act ridiculous. This was not an actor's essential mistake, but his deliberate intention to portray optimistically



Nikolaj Zasukhin as Richard III



Vladimir Samojlov as Richard III

the history Shakespeare had painted tragically. He tried to convince the spectators that human history is not absolutely hopeless if people have learned to mock their tyrants.

Regrettably, it was the last attempt by Soviet theatre in that period to interpret *Richard III* optimistically. In the autumn of 1964 a *coup d'état* took place in Moscow and the Brezhnev era began. This event ended the "Thaw". Later, the Brezhnev period of Soviet history would be called the "time of stagnation". Shakespearean plays were produced on the Soviet stage for the next two decades, just as before, but direct political analogies or allusions to the recent past were either impossible or considerably reduced and softened. This circumstance forced theatre directors and companies to look for other ways and means to bring their message to their spectators.

Nonetheless, the work of the theatres which staged *Richard III* in the early 1960s was not in vain; it created a fruitful tradition which was to be developed further in the 1970s when *Richard III* became one of the most popular Shakespearean plays in the repertoire of dramatic theatres in the USSR: in 1972, at the Rainis Theatre of Latvian Drama in Riga with H. Liepin as Richard; again in 1972, at the Zan'kovets'ka Ukrainian Theatre in L'viv, directed by Serhij Danchenko's and starring Fedir Strygun and Bohdan Stupka; in 1976 at the Crimean Theatre of Russian Drama in Simferopol, directed by Anatolij Novikov with Alexander Goloborod'ko as Richard; in 1976 at the Vakhtangov Theatre in Moscow, directed by Rachya Kaplanyan, with Mikhail Ulyanov, one of the best Russian dramatic actors of his time, as Richard; and finally in 1979, at the Shota Rustaveli Theatre in Tbilisi, Georgia, with the widely known production directed by the prominent Georgian director Robert Sturua with Romaz Chhikvadze as Richard. But these were already the events of another historical period and deserve special consideration.

## Works Cited

- Alekseeva, A. N. "Vladimir Samojlov v roli Richarda" [Vladimir Samojlov plays Richard]. *Uczonye zapiski Gor'kovskogo universitet.* no. 69. Gor'kij: Gor'kovskij Universitet, 1964. 31–35.
- Anikst, Aleksandr. "Stenicheskaja istorija dramaturgii Uilyama Shekspira" [The Stage History of Shakespearean Dramaturgy]. Shekspir, Uilyam. *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenij* [The Complete Works]. Eds. A. Smirnov and A. Anikst. Vol. 8. Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1960. 597–632.
- Bartoshevich, A. "Dialogi s Shekspirom" [Dialogues with Shakespeare]. *Teatr* 6 (1976): 52–56.
- Freedman, Barbara. "Critical junctures in Shakespeare's screen history: the case of *Richard III*." Ed. Russell Jackson. *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 47–71.
- Krymova, N. "'Richard III' v Tbilisi." *Teatr* 8 (1957): 147–52.

- Mel'nikova, S. "Teatral'nye paradoksy 'Richard III'" [Theatrical Paradoxes of 'Richard III']. *Shekspirovskie Chtenija – 1985* [Shakespeare Readings – 1985]. Ed. A. Anikst. Moscow: Nauka, 1987: 173–86.
- Monastyrskij, P. *Glavnyj rezhissyor* [The Chief Director]. Kujbyshev: Knizhnoe Izdatel'stvo, 1985.
- Nels, Sofja. *Shekspir na sovetskoj stsene* [Shakespeare on the Soviet Stage]. Moscow: Iskustvo, 1960.
- Shtein, A. "Malyj Teatr igraet Shekspira" [Maly Theatre Plays Shakespeare]. *Shekspirovskie Chtenija – 1977*. Ed. A. Anikst. Moscow: Nauka, 1980. 257–89.
- Sokolyansky, Mark. "Hamlet in Russian culture of the period of the Thaw." *Hamlet: East-West*. Eds. Marta Gibińska and Jerzy Limon. Gdańsk: Theatrum Gedanense Foundation, 1998. 118–24.